11-01-26 To Congregation Roeh Israel Abilene – Chayei Sarah (the life of Sarah)
Torah Portion; Genesis 23:1 – 25:18
Haftarah: 1 Kings 1:1 - 31
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Matt 12:38-42

Give Me a Sign!

Central question of this message: Are you facing a difficult decision in your life and hope that G-d will give you a sign?

We are in the parashah *Chayei Sarah*. It means "the life of Sarah." The parashah takes its name from the first two words of the English translation, and the second and third words of the original Hebrew.

Gen 23:1–4

> Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. 2 And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. 3 Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, 4 "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."



In our study of last week, we saw that a number of promises were made to Abraham. On my way to discussing signs, I want to address a bit more regarding the promises to Abraham.

He was promised that G-d would give him the land that his eyes saw as a possession to his offspring forever.[1] Further, G-d would multiply his offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand of the seashore.[2]

[1] Gen 13:14–17, Gen 17:4–8
[2] Gen 22:15–18,

When Sarah died, it became clear that their son Yitzhak would be the *only* heir, and only through him could the promise of a "multitude" be realized.

And that brings us to one of the promises which now presents a real issue. Abraham has no place within this "promised land" that he can actually call his own, not even a tiny plot of land in which to bury Sarah.

Abraham is living in the land among the Hittites. He describes himself to them as only passing through as he asks to purchase a burial plot.

Gen 23:3–4

> 3 And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, 4 "I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

Then Abraham began the process of negotiation for a purchase price for a cave at the end of a plot of land belonging to Ephron the Hittite. The haggling goes back and forth, but Abraham decides not to really push for a better bargain. He agrees to the exorbitant "opening bid" by Ephron of 400 shekels.

We don't know why Abraham, who apparently doesn't have any problem engaging in extended negotiations with the Almighty Himself (as he did in the last parashah), is so "taken" in this real estate transaction with a mere mortal.

How "taken" was Abraham. 400 shekels of silver represented more than four years of wages for a laborer. In today's dollars, this would has been estimated to represent over $600,000 in value. And Abraham paid all that for a mere field containing a cave.

At that time, there were few coins being minted. Silver was a medium of trade, but pieces of silver were usually weighed-out to be the amount agreed upon by using a scale and a known object of weight. This is why the Scripture records that Abraham "weighed out for Ephron the silver." (Gen 23:16).

I speculate the reason that Abraham paid this exorbitant price was so for countless generations into the future, none of the Hittites (or any of their descendants or apologists) will ever be able to say, "Abraham cheated us out of that land by not giving us fair value."



Today the reputed place of the "cave of Machpelah" is occupied by a gigantic building constructed by Herod the Great. The Muslims have converted it into a mosque of sorts as well, laying claim to that land. [3]

But of course, those who disregard the rightful title to the entire land given by G-d to the rightful descendants of Abraham will also disregard the fact that Abraham purchased at least this portion of "the west bank" from its previous owners.

[3] Following the Muslim conquest of Hebron in the 7th century, the Byzantine church was converted into the Ibrahimi Mosque, initiating a process of Islamization that significantly altered the Herodian structure.

Key modifications and actions taken by Muslim rulers include:
Architectural Additions: Saladin reconsecrated the site as a mosque in 1188 and added minarets to the corners (two of which survive) and installed a historic minbar (pulpit) from Ashkelon.
Sealing the Cave: During the Mamluk period (starting in the 13th century), authorities sealed the entrance to the underground cave and banned Jews and Christians from entering the building, restricting them to the exterior staircase.
Religious Symbolism: Mamluk rulers encircled the Jewish cenotaphs with Arabic verses to give the site a distinct Islamic identity and declared it a Waqf (Muslim religious trust).
Control: The site remains under the control of the Waqf, which maintains the building and manages access, while the Israeli military controls security and Jewish prayer areas within the divided complex.

So it was at the age of 137 years, Abraham buried Sarah. Then Abraham gets busy finding a wife for Yitzhak (Isaac), who is 37 years of age by that time. Abraham sends his servant to his relatives living in Mesopotamia, and there his servant is directed by G-d to Rebekah.

She returns with the servant Canaan where she sees Yitzhak and they are married.

The story is progressing nicely, but quite slowly. Yitzhak now has a wife, and is beginning to have children. Abraham can finally see a hint of the "multitudes" of descendants which he was promised. But when Abraham dies at age 175 (Chapter 25), can we now draw a map of the "promised land" which is actually owned by Abraham? Actually, we can… it is a very small map of a tiny field in the lands of the Hittites, with a cave at one end of it. Not much of a fulfillment of the grand promise by G-d of a great amount of land.

As Abraham lay on his bed dying, did he consider that G-d had lied to him, or was unable to deliver on His promises? In our flesh, we would be tempted to reach that conclusion. After all, he had been promised that G-d would give this entire land to him personally, as well as to his offspring, forever. But he is now dying without seeing that become true.

With Yitzhak, there at least was a family being created so that the promise of many nations and kings was possible. But with the land? The only land Abraham could claim title to was land that he himself had purchased at an unreasonably high price. Where is G-d's hand in that?

And it is in this seeming failure of G-d's plan that we begin to see the lesson. G-d's plans for the family of Abraham were not to be fulfilled in his lifetime. They were much larger than that.

Until this day there has not yet been a "Land of Israel" which extended to the boundaries that G-d has set for Abraham's inheritance. We can find those boundaries set forth in some detail to Ezekiel.

Eze 47:13–20.

> Thus says the Lord GOD: "This is the boundary by which you shall divide the land for inheritance among the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph shall have two portions. 14 And you shall divide equally what I swore to give to your fathers. This land shall fall to you as your inheritance.
> 15 "This shall be the boundary of the land: On the north side, from the Great Sea by way of Hethlon to Lebo-hamath, and on to Zedad, 16 Berothah, Sibraim (which lies on the border

between Damascus and Hamath), as far as Hazer-hatticon, which is on the border of Hauran. 17 So the boundary shall run from the sea to Hazar-enan, which is on the northern border of Damascus, with the border of Hamath to the north. This shall be the north side.

18 “On the east side, the boundary shall run between Hauran and Damascus; along the Jordan between Gilead and the land of Israel; to the eastern sea and as far as Tamar. This shall be the east side.

19 “On the south side, it shall run from Tamar as far as the waters of Meribah-kadesh, from there along the Brook of Egypt to the Great Sea. This shall be the south side.

20 “On the west side, the Great Sea shall be the boundary to a point opposite Lebo-hamath. This shall be the west side.

If you are unfamiliar with these locations, you are not alone. But some scholars have located them and have created a map of what will be the full extent of the Promised Land in the future. I am not personally completely satisfied that these are the actual boundaries, but they do demonstrate that the Promised Land is going to be far larger than that seen today, or any day in the past, as the Land of Israel.


City
City (modern name)
Mountain peak
Extent of Promised Land
0 10 20 30 40 Miles
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 Kilometers
A
B
C
1
2
3
4
Sumra
el-Kabir R.
Heitela
Lake of Homs
Rablah
Tripolis
Mt. Akkar (7,270 ft 2,216 m)
Ras Shakkah (1,597 ft 487 m)
Mt. Makmel (10,128 ft 3,087 m)
Orontes R.
Sadad
Qaryatein
Lebweh
Byblos
Mt. Mneitri (6,525 ft 1,989 m)
Baalbek
Brital
Beirut
Mt. Sannin (8,622 ft 2,628 m)
LEBANON MTS.
BEQA' VALLEY
Abana R.
ANTI-LEBANON MTS.
Sidon
Damascus
Mt. Hermon (9,232 ft 2,814 m)
Pharpar R.
Tyre
Litani R.
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
BASHAN
SEA OF GALILEE
Yarmuk R.
Edrei
Mt. Hauran
Salecah
Jordan R.
Jabbok R.
GILEAD
AMMON
Rabbah (Amman)
Medeba
MISHOR
Gaza
T. el-'Ajjul
DEAD SEA
Arnon R.
WILDERNESS OF KEDEMOTH
Besor Brook
Beersheba
MOAB
W. el-Arish
HAZERA RIDGE
Zered Brook
Neqb Safa
W. Murra
Tamar
WILDERNESS OF ZIN
Mt. Teref
RAMON
EDOM
Kadesh-barnea
Mt. Kharif

How will the Land finally reach its full extent? I am not certain, but I am certain of this… G-d knows. Will we accomplish this? Not alone. We must act in accordance with G-d's will and in His strength. Can we help to establish the Promised Land in its fullness in this day? Certainly we can speak against the enemies of Israel, and some of us can defend the land itself by standing in strength on that land.

Which brings me to what I want to focus on now. Signs.

We recall that Abraham's trusted servant, Eliezer of Damascus was sent to Abraham's relatives to get a bride for his son Isaac.[4] Abraham was aware that bringing into his tents a pagan woman would have a great potential to turn his son away from his faith in the One true G-d.

Eliezer, being a wise servant, was thinking ahead, and speculated that his arrival at his destination, and his request for a bride, wouldn't be sufficient to carry the day.

Gen 24:5-9

> 5 And the servant said to him, "Suppose the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son

[4] Identified in Gen 15:2

back to the land from where you came?" 6 Then Abraham said to him, "Beware lest you take my son back there! 7 "The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me, and who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. 8 But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there." 9 So the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter.

Before we get too far, I want you to see a couple of things that stand out. First is the command “don’t take my son back there.” Why did Abraham not wish for Eliezer to take Isaac with him to get a bride? I think one thing stands out to me. First of all, G-d was to select the bride, not Isaac, and if Isaac were alongside Eliezer, there would be a lot of interference with him hearing G-d on the matter. Abraham was using good discernment. He knew that young men select brides differently than G-d does. Young men see in a limited fashion, but G-d sees much more deeply. Let that be enough said about that.

Second, is the placing of the "hand under the thigh." What is that all about? The Sages have had considerable discussion of this practice, which occurs only twice in all of Torah. The second is when Jacob called upon Joseph to swear an oath not to allow him to be buried in Egypt. (Gen 47:29). This action represents that the master has ultimate authority over the servant, and also that the servant will faithfully follow the master's directions.

Rabbi Steinsaltz has a useful commentary as well:

> Abraham said to him: Please, place your hand under my thigh, which was an ancient manner of taking an oath. In contrast to grasping or shaking hands, which expresses a commitment between two individuals of similar social status, an oath accepted by placing one's hand under the thigh[5] of a seated person was typically used in the case of an agreement between an individual with a senior status and someone under his jurisdiction. By this action, the taker of the vow expresses his commitment to perform the bidding of the one administering the oath.

[5] Here he refers to the reproductive organs of a male

Now let’s look at how Eliezer carried out his assignment – he began with asking for a sign.

Gen 24:12-15

> 12 And he said, "O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham. 13 Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; 14 now may it be that the girl to whom I say,' Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers,' Drink, and I will water your camels also'; — may she be the one whom Thou hast appointed for Thy servant Isaac; and by this I shall know that Thou hast shown lovingkindness to my master."

How did that work out for him?

Gen 24:15-21

> 15 And it came about before he had finished speaking, that behold, Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on

her shoulder. 16 And the girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her; and she went down to the spring and filled her jar, and came up. 17 Then the servant ran to meet her, and said, "Please let me drink a little water from your jar." 18 And she said, "Drink, my lord"; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink. 19 Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking." 20 So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels.

Eliezer immediately rewarded her generosity, and marked her for later identification, by giving her some gold jewelry.

Gen 24:22-25

22 Then it came about, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a gold ring weighing a half-shekel[6] and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels in gold[7], 23 and said, "Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room

[6] Probably weighing around 0.25oz of gold. This would have been the size of a wide wedding band, and its value would be approximately $1,300 in today's dollars.
[7] If the bracelets together were five shekels each, they would weigh around 4 ounces each, with a value of $20,000 each. If each bracelet were ten shekels in weight, they would each weigh about 8 ounces each, with a value of $40,000 each.

for us to lodge in your father's house?" 24 And she said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor."

How much water did she draw for the camels? There were ten camels with Eliezar. A dehydrated camel can drink up to 40 gallons of water to replenish its supply in only a few minutes. Assuming the camels were dehydrated after this long trip, then she might have drawn 400 gallons of water from the well before the camels were done. Each gallon of water weighs just a bit over 8 lbs per gallon. That comes to 3,200 pounds of water drawn from the bottom of a well, and carried to the water trough for these camels. Assuming only half of this amount of water was needed, it still represents an amazing feat of strength and endurance.

This process of water drawing likely took hours to accomplish, and Eliezer sat watching the entire time. Why did he not help her? This was a test of a couple of things for her to show: First, did she really know what she was getting herself into with her offer of watering the camels? Secondly, was she willing to be faithful to her promise, even though it might leave her exhausted, sore, and maybe with some damaged hands? Any woman who would pass these tests is a "woman of valor" indeed. [8] The gifts of gold jewelry bestowed upon her likely came as a surprise to

[8] See Proverbs 31:10-31 to see what the mother of King Lemuel described as such a woman.

her when given. And that fact also made her worthy of such honor. She did not perform this mitzvah of hospitality with the expectation of any earthly reward.

Eliezer faced a difficult task, with a solemn responsibility. His actions would determine the path of the Hebrew people for the remainder of history. He knew that this was no small matter.

He asked for a sign, and it was given to him in a way that left no doubt in his mind. Others have asked for signs.

What precisely is a "sign?" It is a witness.

The rainbow is a sign of the covenant between G-d and the Earth. (Gen 9:13).
The blood on the doorpost was a sign for us on our houses in Egypt. (Ex 12:13).
The Sabbath is a sign between G-d and us throughout our generations that we are connected to G-d. (Ex. 31:13).
When fire consumed the unleavened bread and the meat on the rock, it was a sign to Gideon that he was in the presence of the Malach Adonai, who was giving him instructions. (Jdg 6:17)

The virgin who conceives and bears a son whose name is Immanuel was a sign of redemption. (Isa 7:11).
The L-rd will set a sign among all nations, to every coastland, as a testimony that He is the true G-d. (Isa 66:19)
One of the signs of the birth of Messiah was where He would be found by those searching. (Lk 2:12)

Signs serve as a witness of the fidelity and faithfulness of G-d to those who love Him, but to those who merely profess G-d, but have rejected His ways, there will be no sign given.

Matt 12:38-42

> 38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." 39 But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; 40 for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41 "The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something

> greater than Jonah is here. 42 "The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

If your heart is turned toward G-d in sincerity, and you are striving to walk in His ways, then you may ask for a sign to guide you in making difficult decisions.

I have done so. Let me tell you the story. Pam and I were both born in the same hospital in the same room of that hospital – some seven years apart – here in Abilene. We married here, and had our first two children here (in the same hospital).

But then my mother fell under the influence of Satan, and tore her family apart. She divorced my father and took most of what he had built during their marriage.

When Pam and I would not join her in her destructive plan, she turned against us as well. He began stalking Pam, and even threatened my life (pointing a pistol at me). I could not allow my family to live in this environment, so we left for Denver.

We lived there for about 40 years. We would return to visit Pam's parents, and Pam's sister (and her family) many times per year, but it was always a bit tense while my mother lived.

Pam felt the urging of the Spirit to return to Abilene. I was in favor of that as well, but had no idea how I might earn a living in Abilene. I saw no gain in moving to Abilene and only live in poverty. So, I asked for a sign. Provide for me sufficient funds so I need not worry about starving while we settled into our homeland.

My mother died, and left her entire estate to her lawyer (who clearly had manipulated her). I engaged a firm of attorneys in Dallas to contest that will. In the settlement, I obtained about a third of her estate, to include the house I currently live in, and the car that Pam drives.

I placed my home in Denver on the market and told G-d if it sold for a certain amount, I would consider that my sign of approval. It sold for well more than the amount I had in mind.

With what I inherited from my mother's estate, and the sale of my home in Denver, I have been able to not only move to Abilene, but also have

sufficient funds so that I can retire comfortably, and provide for Pam's future well after my death.

Does G-d still give signs to His people? He certainly did so for me, and I am aware of others as well.

Will He do so for you? That is between you and G-d. But I do tell you this, if you will connect with G-d in the deepest ways and hold fast to His covenant and His ways… you will certainly be in a better position to ask for a sign, and that sign be given to you.